

# Cultural Connection

An Update on Cultural Competency

Special Edition

December 1999

## RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Many times in clinical practice with severely emotionally disturbed or seriously mentally ill consumers, the notion of religion is avoided, particularly if the consumer presents with religiosity. Some clinicians simply feel more comfortable avoiding such a "hot topic". Recent research has demonstrated a number of factors to keep in mind when working with mental health consumers.

According to Michael Nielson, PhD. (Georgia Southern University), it is the clinicians job to try and understand how religion affects people, not to advocate one religion over another, which is what most of us shy away from. The field of Psychology of Religion is a rich one that is beginning to focus on research and collaboration in the field as a whole.

A number of interesting studies lay merit to the idea of assessing the degree to which organized religion and spirituality apply to consumers (and their families) lives.

A study done in Granada, Spain, entitled Families, Religion and Depressive Symptoms in Caregivers of the Disabled Elderly (Zunzunegui, Beland, Liacer and Keller, J Epidemiol Community Health, 1999 Jun; 53(6): 364-9) focused on the issue of impact of religion in a typical mental health capacity. An assessment was done of 194 caregivers of the disabled elderly (65+), to assess for depressive symptoms, and evaluate the role of family and religiosity on the mental health consequences of caregiving in Spain. The results are not startling. Predictably, religiosity and emotional support play an important factor in positive mental health functioning.

A study on Authentic Religious Experience or Insanity? (Sanderson, Vandenberg and Paese) from the University of Missouri, St Louis, focused on how clinicians make judgements regarding religious authenticity and the mental health of behavior motivated by religious ideation. Participants were presented with written vignettes of religiously motivated behavior and three levels of conventionality. A determining factor was the degree with which the experience deviated from conventional religious beliefs and practices. The more unconventional the behavior, the **less** religiously authentic and mentally healthy it was deemed to be.

In this instance, the degree of **cultural** competency of the clinician would be important to note, as a clinician with an insensitivity to a variety of religious practices, or lack of knowledge in this area would be susceptible to such negative judgements.

Another recent study out of John Hopkins University examined the relationship between maternal church attendance and adolescent mental health and social functioning. Again, the results demonstrate that moms who attended religious services at least one time a week had increased satisfaction with their lives, more family involvement, better skills in solving health-related problems. It was also associated with the youths' outcome in overall satisfaction with mental health and perceived social supports from friends. Religious involvement was as important as or more important than associations involving traditional demographic variables, with the exception of family income level.



A study by Razali, Hasanah, Aminah and Subramaniam, from Universiti Sains Malaysia, as printed in the Aust N Z J Psychiatry, 1998, Dec; 32 (6): 867-72, demonstrates the need for more sensitivity to religious-socio**cultural** issues in the field of mental health. The study addressed the diagnoses of anxiety and depression and established that incorporating a religious and socio-**cultural** component in the treatment program rapidly improved anxiety and depressive symptoms in-patients with strong religious and **cultural** backgrounds.

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill – California, has recently taken the lead in this area, focusing on the utilization of the pastoral community as a positive resource and support for both consumers and family members of mental health services. The studies abound. The point to remember is that religion and, the place that spirituality takes in the consumer's life are important demographics that are often over-looked, or deemed inappropriate to assess. This could not be further from the truth.

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## CONSUMER CORNER

Stephen Secord, 37, suffers with Schizo-affective Disorder and is dually diagnosed (in recovery). He has received services from the County for 7 years in addition to a number of years from other facilities. But Stephen has come a long way from his initial diagnosis. He was appointed to the County Mental Health Board, Chairs the Adult Services Sub-Committee, is a Board member of the South Coast chapter of NAMIOC, a member of Project Together and is instrumental in the development of a new organization, Clients of Orange County. Stephen is quick to point out that although he has accomplished a lot, things haven't always been easy, particularly around the holidays.

"A portion of my illness is due to being light-affected, and there is less sunlight during the winter holidays. There is the stress of having to buy presents for everyone and meeting family members that you don't always see. There are a lot of expectations from family members that you don't usually come across everyday, like, "How come you don't have a job yet?". And, there is a heightened level of agitation in Metropolitan areas during the holiday season, and that cascades down onto the client, making things more difficult."

As Stephen pointed out, there are a number of strategies that he has personally used to combat the stress of the holidays, which is increased due to his mental illness. "I always make sure to schedule a doctors appointment before the end of the year. I make sure I have some quiet time by myself so that I can relax and not be around other people. And I follow doctor's orders."

Stephen adds that since drinking and using other drugs may come up due to social situations around the holidays, that informing your host ahead of time about sobriety is necessary. "Make sure the host and/or family members are aware of your desire for sobriety and that you want something else, like sparkling cider to drink." Another option for consumers combating extra stressors during the holiday season, is to join a support group, like Clients of Orange County. For more information, contact Stephen Secord at (714) 841-5386.



## Celebrating the Season

There are many different ways people all around the world celebrate the holidays. Learning about them helps us get a glimpse of the diversity in traditions families have practiced for centuries. It's fascinating how this season has been embraced and modified by each nation throughout the earth.

For the Christian community, Christmas commemorates the birth of Christ, their savior. It's a season of merriment, a time of giving and sharing. Most countries in Europe, Southern and Northern Americas, and even Asia celebrate Christmas decorating a tree, having company over for dinner, Christmas carols, an array of lights, exchanging of gifts and services at their respective churches. In England, the tree tradition is greater than 180 years old. Before then, it was almost completely a German tradition. Legend says, when Christ was born, all the trees in the forest, despite the fact that it was midwinter, bloomed and bore fruit. The Christmas tree lights represent the starry heaven from which Christ descended to save mankind. In some instances, families have a star on top of their tree, this symbolizes the star the three kings followed to find the manger where Jesus was born.

However, Christmas is not celebrated by everyone. The Jewish community gets together on the end of the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month of the Jewish calendar for Hanukkah. Hanukkah is the observance of the rebellion of the Jews against the Syrians in the Maccabean War of 162 B.C. But the focus of the celebration is really the survival of Judaism. After the Jews' victory, they cleansed and rededicated the Temple then relit the Menorah (or the Perpetual Lamp) hence one of the other names for this celebration is the Feast of Dedication. The story states that although there was only enough consecrated oil to keep the lamp burning for one day, and it would take eight days to get more, the small bottle of oil surprisingly lasted for the entire eight days. For this reason Hanukkah is also known as the Feast of Lights.

Jewish families today spend the holidays by lighting a special Hanukkah Menorah (a candelabrum with holders for eight candles, one for each day of celebration, plus a ninth, the *Shamash* or 'server', used to light the others). One candle is lit the first night, two the second, three the third, and so on until the eighth night when all candles are lit. A special prayer is recited during the lighting, and while the candles burn it is a time for songs and games, including the four-sided toy called *dreidel*. Other customs include the giving of gifts, especially to children, and decorating the home.

Kwanza (Quansa) is celebrated by many African Americans. It is observed December 26 thru January 1. Originally developed by Dr. Karenga in 1966, Kwanza was meant to encourage people to

remember their African roots, as well as their present day lives. Kwanza, which means "first fruits", is based on African festivals.

Although, the Hindus, Buddhists and the Islamic people do not honor any religious occasion in this season, it is not uncommon for them to join the festivities at this time of year. It does not matter what you observe during this period. Universally, this time is marked as a time for reflecting upon oneself. It is the great event of the year which gives us the opportunity to show how we care for others. It is a time of bestowing blessings and good will, a time of celebration.



## Letters to the Editor

Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

**Cultural sensitivity? Cultural Diversity? Cultural Competency?** What does it all mean?... The questions are many. Are we sincere when we talk about... human unity?... administration is to be applauded for... making the effort to be **culturally** sensitive ... They have established a **Cultural Competency** department... In this era of advanced technology and E-mail, we ... live in a global economy with global connections... Our collective technology has become the connecting bridge to our collective consciousness... Let's make the best of it by joining hands, to improve our... human condition.

—Richard M. Skaff, Psy D.  
CYS, CEGU

I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what you are doing with this newsletter, I have been very moved by the sharing of personal experiences by employees such as Rafael and Dave... I have found them (articles) sensitive and informative and I am **learning** too. So often I forget to say what I *do* like and I wanted to make sure you knew this is one employee who really appreciates your work.

—Carol Way, Ph D.  
CQI/CPOP

## Cultural Events Calendar

- Exhibit** November 13 - December 31, 1999 Thursdays thru Tuesdays only from 12 noon - 8 pm  
*The Art of the Twentieth-Century Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Masters*  
**Location:** Los Angeles County Museum of Arts  
**Information:** 213-857-6000
- Exhibit** November 13 - December 31, 1999 Tuesdays thru Sundays only from 11 am - 5 pm  
*The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Works by Five Latin American Artists, Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Helio oitica & Mira Schendel*  
**Location:** The Geffen Contemporary  
**Information:** 213-626-6222
- Exhibit** December 2 - 31, 1999 Thursdays thru Tuesdays only from 12 noon - 8 pm  
*Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten, Nefertiti & Tutankhamen*  
**Location:** Los Angeles County Museum of Arts  
**Information:** 213-857-6000
- Exhibit** December 15 - 31, 1999 Wednesdays thru Sundays only from 12 noon - 8 pm  
*Music in the Life of Africa*  
**Location:** UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History  
**Information:** 310-825-4361
- Event** December 12, 1999  
*Las Posadas : The Mexican Christmas celebration*  
**Location:** Bowers Museum  
**Information:** 714-480-1522
- Event** December 18, 1999  
*Las Posadas: A Fundraiser by MANA*  
**Location:** Bowers Museum  
**Ticket Price:** \$15.00 / person; 1 free child's ticket for every purchased adult ticket  
**Information:** 714-480-1522
- Event** December 18, 1999  
*Holiday Hay Ride*  
**Location:** Clarington Park, Laguna Hills  
**Admission:** Free  
**Information:** 949-707-2680
- Exhibit** December 19 - 31, 1999 Wednesdays thru Sundays only from 10:00 am - 5:00 pm  
*Miniature Chinese Ceramics: From the Ambassador's Collections*  
**Location:** Pacific Asia Museum  
**Information:** 626-449-2742
- Exhibit** December 28 - 31, 1999 10:30 am - 4:30 pm  
*Suiseki Exhibition: Japanese Sculptures Art*  
**Location:** Huntington Library Art Collections & Botanical Gardens  
**Information:** 626-405-2141

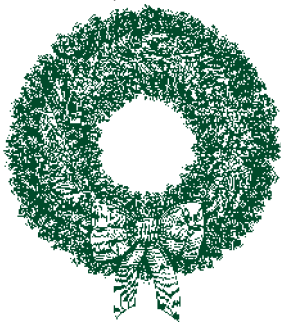
# YOU SPEAK WHAT... ?????

Take a few minutes to match the following languages with their countries of origin...  
Good Luck.

Language	Sample saying— "Merry Christmas"	Country of Origin
1. Azeri	<i>Tezze Iliniz Yahasi Olsun</i>	a) Sri Lanka
2. Manx	<i>Nollick ghennal as blein vie noa</i>	b) Azerbaijan
3. Pushto	<i>Christmas Aao Ne-way Kaal Mo Mobarak Sha</i>	c) Afghanistan
4. Xhosa	<i>Siniqwenelela Ikrisimesi Emnandi Nonyaka Omtsha Ozele Iintsikelelo Namathamsanga</i>	d) New Zealand
5. Yoruba	<i>E ku odun, e hu iye' dun!</i>	e) Central/South Africa
6. Maori	<i>Meri Kirihimete</i>	f) Nigeria
7. Sinhalese	<i>Subha nath thalak Vewa. Subha Aluth Awrudhak Vewa</i>	g) Freisland
8. Frisian	<i>Noflike Krystdagen en in protte Lok en Seine yn it Nije Jier!</i>	h) Island of Man

Answers: 1-b, 2-h, 3-c, 4-e, 5-f, 6-d, 7-a, 8-g

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